

1.24.2021 Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Matthew 5; James 2:1-13)

In the world of Christian apologetics, there are few arguments more famous than the “liar, lunatic, Lord” trilemma that C.S. Lewis presents in *Mere Christianity*. This is what Lewis wrote: “I am trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to do so.”

A person who takes even a moment to consider the many claims Jesus made during His earthly ministry will have to agree with the logic of Lewis’ argument. Great human teachers don’t profess to have the “*power on earth to forgive sins*” (Matthew 9:6), they don’t say over and over again whoever believes in me has “*eternal life*” (John 3:16; 5:21; 11:25), and they most certainly do not claim to be the eternal, absolute, uncreated Creator of heaven and earth by declaring, “*Before Abraham was, I AM*” (John 8:58). A man who was merely a man and said things like that, to use Lewis’ words, “would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the devil of Hell.”

The strength of Lewis’ “liar, lunatic, Lord” trilemma is grounded in the many, different ways Jesus boldly claimed to be God. His claim to be your Creator eliminates the possibility that Jesus was merely a great human teacher, and yet the logic of Lewis’ argument doesn’t force anyone to accept the truth that Jesus is God, his argument only forces a person who doesn’t want to believe Jesus is God to also reject the popular idea that He was merely a great moral teacher. From Lewis’ perspective it would seem that with Jesus it’s all or nothing. Either He “was, and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool... or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.” What you can’t do with Him is find some safe, politically correct middle ground. You either accept every Word, every claim,

and every command as proceeding from the mouth of God, or else you reject Him entirely.

Most of us are probably familiar with Lewis' argument, and agree that a man who was merely a man and yet claimed to be God would not be a great moral teacher, but have you ever considered the additional thought that a man who was merely a man and taught the sort of things Jesus taught wouldn't be a great moral teacher. Great teachers don't set before their students a standard they can never hope to achieve, yet from a natural, human perspective that's exactly what it appears Jesus did with His first disciples, and it's exactly what He seems to do with us. One of the many examples of that fact is found in the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon Jesus repeatedly quotes moral commands that are familiar to all of us, but instead of allowing His disciples to simply obey the letter of the law, Jesus expands and elevates what the law teaches, and then commands full obedience to the spirit of the law.

He tells His disciples, *“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgement: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement...”* (Matthew 5:21-22). Again He says, *“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart”* (vs. 27-28). And again, *“Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also”* (vs. 38-39). And again, *“Ye have heard that it hath been said, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you”* (vs. 43-44). From a fallen, human perspective, Jesus seems to have set the bar at an impossible height, but He's not done yet. At the end of this passage, Jesus punctuates all that He has said with the command: *“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”* (vs. 48).

There are many people in our society who would consider the Sermon on the Mount to simply be great moral teaching from a great human teacher, but that can't be true. What great human teacher would expect their student to be as perfect as God? If Jesus was only a human teacher, His teaching would lead

us only to despair and failure. It is a dangerous trap for a person to have such a low view of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount that they see it as Jesus merely teaching His disciples. When we read His words we must carefully consider who He is. He is the Word who was *with God* in the beginning. He is the Word who *was God* in the beginning (John 1:1). When we read His words we must prayerfully consider what our Lord and God says to us, "*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*" And when we read His words we must come to terms with the truth we heard in our New Testament lesson this morning, the truth that "*whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it*" (James 2:10).

So, stop for a moment. Begin to consider who He is... What He commands... The depth of our fall... and you will realize Jesus did not come merely to teach, He came to save. Jesus is not a great human teacher. He is our Lord and God. He is our Savior and Redeemer. He is the One who came to make us into what He teaches us to be. It's just as He said to Peter and Andrew on that day by the Sea of Galilee, "*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men*" (Matthew 4:19).

Our Creator and Redeemer intends to make us into what He teaches us to be. This is the infinite difference between teaching and Redemption. A teacher is happy when their student improves, but God didn't become man so that we could become better people. God became man so that we could become an entirely "*new creation*" in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Lewis spoke of that truth, and said it this way, "God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better people of the old kind but to produce a new kind of person. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature...." A winged creature that can "soar over fences which could never have been jumped..."

Even the greatest human teachers can't make their students into something they are not. They can't turn jumping horses into winged creatures, but as you know, "*the things which are impossible with men are possible with God*" (Luke 18:27). Our Creator and Redeemer intends to make you into what He teaches you to be: *perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*. That road may be long, that path will be difficult, but we know where the journey ends, for we have the promise that "*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 1:6). God will finish the good work He began in you.